

# Are Garden Communities the solution to the housing crisis?

Amongst the Covid crisis, it's easy to forget the other crisis felt by millions of younger people – that of the housing crisis which if anything, has become starker over this period of lockdown with families crammed in unsuitable housing.

One solution, is the "Garden Community". There are around 49 Garden Communities currently being proposed around the country. They are seen as a way to persuade the not-in-my-backyarders to tolerate urgently needed new housing estates. But are garden cities the solution to Britain's housing crisis?

## What is a Garden Community?

A Garden Community is not a new idea, but the latest iterations of a century old concept developed by Ebenezer Howard, namely, Letchworth Garden City, Welwyn Garden City, Hampstead Garden Suburb. They are standalone settlements which are intended to be self-contained places to live and work. Following the initial examples in the 1920s, the legislating of land through a planning system in 1947 saw New Towns in the 1960s and 1970s with Stevenage, Milton Keynes, Basingstoke, Crawley, Basildon for instance.

The latest iterations – Garden Communities – was launched in 2014, and the programme now includes 49 projects extending across all regions of England. These encompass both entirely standalone new settlements (35%) but also a significant number of urban extensions (65%) to deliver 403,000 homes, up to 182 new primary schools and 56 secondary schools, and 600 or more hectares of employment land which in turn would support 1.3m additional jobs over its construction period to 2050 (source: How does your garden grow by Lichfields, 2019).

Creation of new roads, schools and shops around a self-sufficient development can be appealing to local authorities and residents alike, meaning the associated services and infrastructure is built to modern requirements. But with Boris promising to Build, Build, Build, do garden cities pose the "easy" solution they promise?

There have been issues for the Government in implementing their new programme. Only a third of the 49 communities have any planning status and most require allocation through a Local Plan followed by planning permission. This is not always straightforward as we have seen in North Essex in the last few months where two new garden communities which were to deliver 34,000 homes all failed to be shown as viable or deliverable when scrutinised by an independent inspector.

Equally, for those thinking these are a sustainable, green solutions, this may not be the case with only 8% within walking distance to a train station (800m – 10 mins walk) and a third are within 2km (25mins walk).

Finally, for those currently seeking a new home, they would have a long wait to be on site. Based on an indicative trajectory using industry benchmarks, the programme is unlikely to be delivering homes at scale until the 2030s but at that point, could be delivering up to 16,000 dwellings per annum based on typical build rates.

The Government has ambitious housing targets to resolve the housing crisis and is seeking to deliver 300,000 homes a year (around 240,000 homes were delivered in 2018-2019 – a 30 year high). The alternative to achieving these targets is placing 300,000 homes a year within and around existing towns and villages.

There are certainly benefits to extending our towns and cities as part of their ongoing evolution and it is recognised by the Country Landowners Association that villages are stagnating e.g. frozen in time due to a lack of new residents contributing to existing services. Whilst there are a number of reasons why people leave their rural community, the provision of housing is an important one as homes to support the next generation are not built. In addition, there are other benefits brought by development in terms of jobs creation, local authority revenue benefits and support to the local economy as well as the quick delivery of housing are benefits. Nonetheless, there are also challenges, for instance increasing pressure on historical roads, demands placed on infrastructure such as doctors and schools for instance.

## The answer?

A bit of both – to ensure housing is delivered quickly (the housing crisis is affecting people today) and to deliver the benefits of new housing to existing towns and villages, there is a need for those sites on edge of existing towns and villages however, the challenge before us as an industry to deliver 300,000 homes a year does also require some big solutions, and that is where new settlements can play a role. These do not need to be one of the Government's "Garden Communities" but instead sustainable new settlements. The mistake would be to think this alone can resolve the housing crisis and a variety of housing sites of different sizes and locations are required.

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